

Deaf Culture Question of the Week – May 28-June 1, 2012
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For many years the NAD held a Miss Deaf America Pageant which highlighted the poise and talents of young deaf and hard-of-hearing women. The young woman selected as Miss Deaf America became an ambassador of goodwill representing the NAD at events by traveling the country making appearances to both deaf and hearing groups to portray a positive image of the Deaf community.

When did the Miss Deaf American Pageant start and when was the last Miss Deaf America selected?

- a) 1880 - 2000
- b) 1962-2010
- c) 1972-2012
- d) 1970-2006

Answer “c” – 1972-2012. The first Miss Deaf America, Ann Billington, was selected at the NAD Convention in 1972 in Miami Beach, Florida. Who will be the last Miss Deaf America selected at the 51st Biennial Conference of the NAD in Louisville, Kentucky in July 2012?

The Miss Deaf America Pageant has its roots in the NAD’s National Cultural Program begun by Dr. Douglas Burke in 1966. This program whose purpose was to find the talents hidden within the Deaf community led to the Miss Deaf America Pageant which lasted for 40 years with a young deaf women being selected as Miss Deaf America every two years at the NAD convention.

The program has always been controversial for different reasons. The tensions between oralism and the use of sign language played themselves out in this program as well. Should Miss Deaf America be able to speak? Should only fluent users of

ASL receive the crown? Should the playing of musical instruments be permitted as part of the talent portion of the contest? What image of being Deaf should be represented in Miss Deaf America? The first Miss Deaf America, Ann Billington, was raised orally only learning sign language as a student at Gallaudet. She signed while vocally singing the song “Hey, Look Me Over” during the talent portion of the contest in 1972. This seems unimaginable today.

More recently the pageant has come under criticism in general as not reflecting appropriately on the role of women in society. Over the years the NAD attempted to respond to this criticism by renaming the pageant as the Miss Deaf America Ambassador Program and replacing the swimsuit contest with a sportswear segment. But ultimately the concept of “a beauty pageant” and the “display of young women on a stage in evening gowns and sportswear” could not be shaken. In 2012 the NAD finally phased out the Miss Deaf America program. It will be replaced by what they are calling a youth Ambassador Program which will be open to both male and female contestants. Read more about this here:

<http://www.nad.org/youth/miss-deaf-america-ambassador-program>

Over the years the Miss Deaf America contest at the NAD Convention has been one of the most popular and widely attended events. It will remain to be seen if the selection of male and female “youth ambassadors” will be equally popular.

Read about the announcement ending the Miss Deaf America program here:
NAD Miss Deaf America Program Changes (from SigNews, December, 2011, Vol. 9, Issue 12) http://issuu.com/signews/docs/dec_e-news_1

Read a very interesting article about the history of the Miss Deaf America Pageant and the role of Deaf women projected by it in this article:

Women and Deafness: Double Vision

<http://gupress.gallaudet.edu/excerpts/WADthree5.html>

See pictures and short bios of the final group of candidates vying for the crown Miss Deaf America in 2012 here:

<http://www.nad.org/louisville/miss-deaf-america-contestants>

Deaf Culture Questions of the Week are archived at: <http://www.wsd.wa.gov>